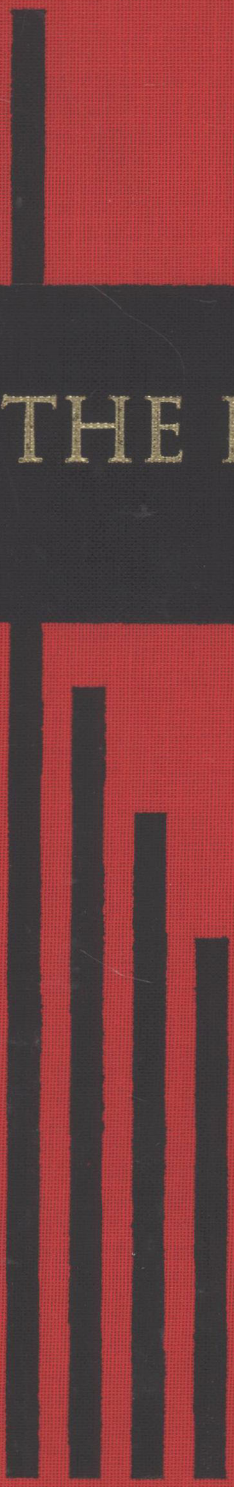
THE PUBLIC SPHERE

VOLUME I



THE PUBLIC SPHERE

VOLUME IV

The Future of the Public Sphere

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THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Introduction: The Future of the Public Sphere

Jostein Gripsrud, Hallvard Moe, Anders Molander and Graham Murdock

The classical idea of the public sphere explored in the previous three volumes in this series has been based on four key assumptions. That society is both relatively homogeneous ethnically and predominantly secular. That reason is the only admissible arbiter of the better argument; that the nation-state is the modal unit of political identity and organisation. And that the public sphere is primarily anchored in face-to-face encounters and deliberations but draws on the informational, argumentative and imaginative resources offered by the major mass media – the press, broadcasting, and film. Over the last two decades a series of separate but interlinked developments have called all of these assumptions into question posing major challenges for public sphere theory.

The increasing mobility of labour and the acceleration of inward migration into the major centres of economic dynamism have created societies that are more multicultural and heterodox and where revivified religious communities have become more militant in pressing to have their faith-based positions accorded equality of treatment in the public sphere. Alongside this increasing internal fracturing we see the primacy of the nation-state as the prime container of the public sphere challenged by the emergence of transnational political formations, such as the European Union, and the revival of transnational cultural spaces, such as the Islamic public sphere. These developments are inflected in turn by major changes in the ecology of communications, with the rise of satellite and cable systems supporting cultural flows across borders and the rapid growth of the Internet offering both mass distribution and new spaces for interpersonal exchange and deliberation. This present

volume examines the debates that are gathering around these shifts and explores their implications for the future of the public sphere as both an ideal and a set of practices.

Section 1: The Internet as a Public Sphere

Theorists of the public sphere have always seen face-to-face encounters as the essential precondition for fully realised deliberation arguing that it is through the multiple instances of everyday turn-taking, from talk across the dinner table to public meetings, that the ideal of the public sphere is realised in practice. The mass media – newspapers, broadcasting, novels, films – provide essential informational, argumentative and imaginative resources for the construction of good reasons, but it is their translation into the give-and-take of discussion on public issues in concrete social settings that gives the public sphere its vitality. The development of the Internet has attracted the attention of commentators on the public sphere precisely because it changes the organisation of public communication.

On the one hand, by providing new, vertical, channels of mass distribution it strengthens the discursive power of the major producers of media content. At the same time, it also supports an explosion of peer-to-peer exchange and participation. The more optimistic early commentators, represented here by Mark Poster, saw these horizontal networks as radically egalitarian spaces, allowing users to initiate as well as to respond, and to by-pass or challenge embedded authority structures

For Yochai Benkler, the Internet creates a new networked public sphere built around the expanding opportunities for individuals to voice their experiences, observations and questions in public through new, user-initiated, communicative forms, such as blogging and citizen journalism. He sees this upsurge of vernacular expression operating as a potent force for democratisation by simultaneously eroding the monopolies over public communication enjoyed by media professionals and changing and forging new ways of connecting biographies to histories, the personal to the political.

More pessimistic commentators however pointed to the blockages standing in the way of widening participation. It was clear from early surveys that access to computing facilities was strongly stratified by income. In response, democratic governments launched concerted efforts to close this "digital divide" by making personal computing more widely available to poorer households, either by giving or renting them a home machine or establishing access points in public locations. As Graham Murdock and Peter Golding point out, by constructing the problem as primarily a matter of economics, these interventions ignored the substantial social and cultural barriers to participation. Access to Internet in itself did not guarantee that it would be

used as a vehicle for political participation as well as an extension of media consumption and a means of private communication.

For Peter Dahlgren, political engagement on the Internet is a dimension of citizen's wider involvement in civic culture and requires the same capacities, including communicative skills and the ability to see oneself as an active citizen capable of participating effectively. The unequal distribution of these cultural resources plays a major role in generating self-exclusions.

The multidimensional nature of barriers to participation is confirmed by Steffen Albrecht's study of the online forum established to discuss the future development of Hamburg. Although open to anyone, and relevant to everyone living in the city, the pattern of contributions tended to reproduce the social biases in political participation more generally, with more men than women posting ideas and comments, and discussion being dominated by an active and committed minority, with a fifth of participants accounting for three quarters of all contributions. The forum also reproduced the biases familiar from studies of news reporting. Topics that were original or controversial were represented more prominently and attracted more replies making it difficult to introduce new issues.

In addition to raising issues about the organisation of on-line deliberation, critical observers have also complained about its incivility. For Zizi Papacharissi, much of this commentary confuses civility with politeness. She argues for a redefinition of civility that identifies it with behaviour that enhances democratic conversation by upholding the core democratic ideal of equality of respect and treatment. Using this criterion the resort to stereotyping and the denial of rights (for example to speech) would be clear instances of incivility. Within these boundaries however deliberation could admit passion, robustness, and heated disagreement. Such forceful expression might not always conform to common sense understandings of politeness but, Papacharissi argues, it might meet the requirements of democratic emancipation.

Section 2: Fragmentation and Segmentation

John Keane remaps the conventional contours of the public sphere by allocating the national public sphere outlined by Habermas to the middle or meso level in a hierarchy. Above it, he argues, we see the formation of new macro, transnational, public spheres (discussed in section 4 of this volume), while below it we see digital technologies fostering a proliferating range of micro spheres built around specific shared interests. For Todd Gitlin, this fragmentation means that the communicative space previously occupied by an open shared public sphere is progressively colonised by a multiplicity of self-enclosed "sphericules". For Robert Putnam, this increasing segmentation

runs the risk of creating a "cyberbalkanization" in which participants only communicate with people who already share their interests and never engage in the dialogues across difference that is an essential precondition for the public sphere as originally conceived. As Cass Sunstein argues, drawing on research on group polarisation, unless contending and dissenting voices are included in the same communicative space, participants in online deliberations tend to end up holding more entrenched versions of the positions they already support, making the ideal of genuine deliberation even more difficult to realise.

Section 3: Difference and Deliberation

Over the last three decades the discursive life of the major Western democracies has been transformed by three major developments. Firstly, new social movements around ethnicity, gender, and sexuality have reanimated questions about group rights. Secondly, inward migration, often from former colonial territories, has produced a more multi-cultural landscape characterised by divergent, and often antagonistic, value systems. Thirdly, there has been a resurgence in religious world views, particularly in their more fundamentalist forms. Taken together, these developments present major challenges to the ideal of deliberative democracy in general, and the ideal of the political public sphere in particular.

Iris Marion Young sees a "culturalist" argument underpinning liberal and Left concerns that shared cultural membership is forging a new politics of identity in which self-enclosed enclaves abandon any commitment to a common polity and pursue their own sectional interests. This overvaluation of difference, is, she argues, matched by its denial in liberal accounts of the public sphere that forget that access to cultural resources and authoritative voice are structured by the prevailing distribution of power. These structural inequalities underpin group differences at every social level, generating particular perspectives on the organisation of social life. Hence, Young argues, far from being a barrier to more inclusive deliberation, group differentiation is an important resource for democratic communication. Because all socially grounded perspectives are partial, including them all in the public sphere is more likely to produce just outcomes. Participants do not need to share a common interest in order to arrive at solutions to shared problems. They simply have to commit themselves to public discussion in search of a solution.

The public sphere is not simply an arena for problem solving however, its participants also question prevailing assumptions and arrangements. In her contribution, Seyla Benhabib tries to steer deliberative democratic theory in a direction which allows it to face the challenge of a multiculturalist society, arguing that we need a public sphere capable of housing "maximum cultural

contestation". Nowhere is this questioning more evident than in the demands made by religious groups to play a more central role in political life.

The Enlightenment's installation of the rule of reason as the only admissible basis for modern knowledge and governance required the marginalisation of religion. The will of the people replaced the divine right of kings as the basis of political legitimacy. The State was uncoupled from the Church and reconstituted as a resolutely secular institution. Religious observance was guaranteed as an individual right but became a private matter. Public discourse was dominated by secular worldviews grounded in appeals to science. The devout were permitted to speak the language of faith in private but expected to mobilise the discourse of reason whenever they entered the public domain. This separation is now under concerted challenge.

As Benhabib notes, integrating religious groups into the public sphere immediately bumps up against the requirement that participants provide "good reasons" for their positions by bringing forward justifications grounded in the public exercise of reason rather than the tenets of faith. She addresses this issue by distinguishing between the syntax and semantics of reasons in the public sphere. At the syntactical level, she argues, reasons would only finally count as valid if they could be shown to be in the best interests of all considered as equal moral and political actors. However, at the level of semantics, a range of arguments and reasons might be brought forward in the process of arriving at this conclusion.

Jürgen Habermas, in the article reprinted here, endorses this general approach arguing that the assumption that in a secular state only secular reasons count, places an unfair burden on citizens whose faith informs everything they do, and that they should be allowed to express and justify their convictions in religious language. However, in order to move from what he calls the "wild life" of the political public sphere, rooted in the plurality of civil society, and be incorporated into the agendas and negotiations within political bodies, he insists that propositions first need to be "translated" into secular terms since the separation of Church and State requires that only secular reasons are admissible in legislative debates. He sees "translation" as a cooperative task involving all citizens, in which the faithful must look for arguments that are generally accessible to all to support their positions and secular citizens must be open to the possible truth content of religious presentations. However, given that religious convictions are underpinned by a belief in revealed truths, believers may well reject the rigorous discursive examination that secular conceptions of the good are subject to, making translation impossible.

The fact that most believers belong to religious communities that have global reach also poses questions about the present and future organisation of public spheres that go well beyond the confines of national political systems.

Section 4: Transnational Public Spheres

From the outset of modernity, decisions over the conditions that structure people's everyday lives and opportunities have never been entirely contained within the boundaries of nation states. But over the last two decades this migration of power "offshore" has accelerated. The combination of thickening digital networks and deregulatory policies has given capital, particularly financial capital, unprecedented transnational reach. There has also been a strengthening of regional blocs, led by an enlarged European Union, together with a more generalised process of globalisation, whereby shared problems are increasingly addressed by a range of ad hoc forms of global governance centred on transnational political agencies

Manuel Castells sees global governance being matched by, and in tension with, a new globalised civil society, built around the proliferating range of Non-Governmental Organisations and social movements which are addressing key issues, such as climate change and social justice, within a global frame of reference. He argues that debate on these issues is shifting from the national to the global level and is increasingly located within a global public sphere based on the new multi modal communicative spaces provided by the Internet and transnational media, particularly satellite television. Castells is mainly concerned with mapping general trends. He is offering a programmatic rather than an empirical analysis. Consequently, he leaves aside the question of how well these new transnational media actually operate as a public sphere in their day-to-day performance.

One answer to this question is provided by Simon Cottle and Mugdha Rai in their detailed study of the organisation of reporting on four major satellite new channels with global reach; BBC World, CNNI, Fox News and Sky News (Australia) in which they identify a number of "communicative frames" through which the voices, views and values of contending interests around the world are packaged and presented. They find the news bulletins they analysed dominated by short updates and reports on events, with little or no space for the exploration of context or complexity, and constructed within the frameworks provided by prevailing Western interests and interpretations. Conversely, frames based around investigations of abuses of power or campaigns for redress, barely registered. They end by calling for more research on the politics of representation within the key media being hailed as building blocks for a global public sphere.

The fact that research in this area is still relatively thin on the ground is one indicator of a more general theoretical failing, which, as Nancy Fraser points out, is rooted in public sphere theory's continuing adherence to a model of the public sphere in which citizens of a nation state participate in deliberations designed to generate a public opinion that is then translated into the laws passed by elected national assemblies. In a radical revision to

this model (which she admits to endorsing in her own earlier work) she argues that under conditions where global capital is increasingly able to evade national regulation, rather than taking shared national citizenship as the basis for participatory rights, deliberative processes must include all those potentially affected by political decisions regardless of their citizenship. As she acknowledges, this new criterion requires the construction of new transnational public powers which can be made accountable to new democratic circuits of public opinion. Neither of these structures currently exists, but for many commentators the European Union (though still territorially bounded) illustrates both the problems and possibilities.

As Bernhard Peters points out, many observers of the EU point to the democratic deficit that lies at its heart. This is partly due to the relatively weak links between public opinion and decision making, arising from the division of powers between the directly elected parliament and the unelected Commissioners and Council of Ministers. But, as Peters notes, it is also due to the perceived underdevelopment of a European public sphere. He paints a bleak picture arguing that media consumption in most EU states remains anchored in either national or American productions with comparatively little exchange between member countries. He sees this lack of a distinctively European space of imagination and deliberation as a key obstacle to the genuine democratisation of European politics.

Jostein Gripsrud offers a more optimistic prognosis pointing to the rapid growth of pan European satellite and cable channels and the European Broadcasting Union's modest but tangible gains in promoting European cooperation and exchange. He sees these developments laying the practical groundwork for a common European public sphere by fostering a feeling of belonging, of sharing a distinctive continental cultural space that is not America. This sense of communality is, he argues, an essential precondition for participation in deliberation on common political issues. Within Europe however, imaginative unities co-exist with continuing political disaggregation.

As James Bohman points out, because the EU is institutionally polycentric with regional and national decision-making operating alongside decisions taken at the European level, the ambition to create a unified public sphere based on a common identity becomes an impediment to democracy. It needs to be replaced by efforts to mobilise the Internet's capacity to create a new public of publics based around a vibrant civil society in which organisations and groups debate and discuss decisions. This activity would then form the basis for a "directly deliberative" system that promotes interaction across sites and locations, creating a shared body of experience and knowledge and common goals while allowing for diversity of implementation. As he points out however, this still leaves open the question of what institutional arrangements would best facilitate the necessary links between disaggregated groups and between diverse publics and poly-centric decision-making

processes.

For Hans-Jörg Trenz, the challenge of adjusting public sphere theorising to the social and political realities of the "unity in diversity" of Europe presents a new opportunity to reconstruct the public sphere through discursive practices that interrogate the aspirations for reconciliation and universality that confining the public sphere within the nation state has repressed. It is precisely the incompleteness of this project, Trenz argues, that provides the impetus for its potential transnationalisation and constructs both the European public sphere and the EU polity as works in progress, in pursuit of the idealised project of integration.

John Bowen's ethnographic observations of the dialogues hosted by a mosque in Paris offer a concrete example of this interrogation of unity in diversity in practice. Drawing on the unbroken history of deliberation within a transnational Islamic public sphere dating back to the faith's foundation, and on their knowledge of French norms, Muslim participants debate with non-Muslim invitees on how best to interpret and apply Islamic norms to contemporary conditions. Hence, while they may insist that Islamic norms require women to wear head coverings they may also point out that Islam defends women's rights to choose, a value that is fully in accord with the Enlightenment promotion of individual freedom.

Frederik Stjernfelt, in contrast, sees the emergence of multi-culturalism reinforcing the idea that people are defined primarily by the cultural group they belong to and producing an insistence that "cultures" have the right not to be insulted or defamed. Writing in the aftermath of the furore following the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, he argues that this "culturalist" perspective has tempted some on the political Left to support the demands of religious groups within minority communities for special protection against perceived insults. As he points out, this is particularly ironic given that the battle for freedom of speech originated in the struggle to dismantle organised religion's monopoly over public culture and to defend the individual's right to challenge entrenched centres of power, including centres of faith.

Conclusion

The contributions to this final volume have explored a number of issues for public sphere theory posed by the combination and convergence of major shifts in the political and communicative landscape. A number have raised central questions about the practical difficulties of developing forms of the public sphere that meet these changed conditions. But they have also responded by rethinking and reformulating some of the key terms and assumptions of public sphere theory. These efforts may or may not prove to

be successful but the vigour of the debates they have engendered is testimony to the enduring value of the idea of the public sphere as an essential yardstick against which to measure the performance of democratic forms of politics and the organisation of popular participation in the process of governance.

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